

Alex Pratt
Feb 10, 2011

Testimony to the Attorney General's Commission on Anti-Bullying

Today, more than ever, bullying is not just the shoving of underclassmen into lockers, or beating up the unpopular kids in the chess club. Physical intimidation is still present, but it is a front that we're winning, thanks in part to the anti-bullying law that Governor Patrick signed last year.

Instead, students like me are more at risk of social harassment from rumors, name-calling, and exclusion. And that bullying is harder to escape, and harder for school faculty to notice and eliminate.

The current law does great work to provide teachers and administrators with the skills necessary to address bullying in the classroom. But based on my experience, and the experience of my classmates, schools do not go far enough to monitor cyberbullying, instill in students positive social values, or help students recover from the emotional, social, physical, and academic suffering brought on by bullying.

Students today are not limited to telephone calls or emails when communicating electronically. Across the Commonwealth, we interact with smart phones and laptops, desktops and tablets. Instant messaging, text messaging, Facebook messaging - we use it all. Those and other platforms gain their appeal in part due to two things: they are new, and they are unsupervised.

To combat cyberbullying, I would not recommend keeping technology out of reach, or monitoring your child's every move online or on the phone. Instead, we must teach students about using those tools, protecting themselves from cyberbullying, and reporting incidents of bullying.

One website, called FormSpring, allows students to send anonymous messages to one another, answers to questions like "What do you think of me?" This is an invitation for cyber bullies to unleash their worst words, and I know that at my school, students have received harassment that has pushed them to depression and morbid thoughts of the "forever decision." We need to be able to subpoena the identities of cyber bullies, as well as the content of their messages. I know that wireless carriers AT&T and Verizon delete text message history, removing the data and limiting the ability of school principals to reprimand cyber bullies.

Something that we have been discussing at the Student Advisory Council is character education, a method of raising children to be fair, friendly, and responsible adults. There are a number of resources that schools can use for character education that are either low-cost or free - an easy price to pay for a better citizenry.

Rachel's Challenge is one of those resources. Dr. Nan Stein, who testified earlier, equated it to "junk science." Yet just hours ago, at a meeting with student representatives from Central

Massachusetts, students expressed the effectiveness of the program at creating a better, safer learning environment, the program that took quite a toll on the bullying going at schools. It is my belief that Rachel's Challenge and programs like it help protect students from bullying. Take it from someone on the ground, someone who walks the halls and sees bullying going on.

A lot of attention has been given to "perpetrators", "bullies", the students who are carrying out the harassment. This is good - it's an area needing attention. But equal, if not more, attention should be paid to the victim, to Phoebe Prince, to Carl Walker-Hoover, to the thousands of victims in our state K-12 schools. Stopping bullying would be great. But there is still the rubble, the debris, left over from those bullying incidents.

Victims of bullying should be offered counseling immediately after an incident, and on a regular basis until both the student and the counselor feel that the victim has had their needs met.

My own school district has made the admirable step of helping the bullies be "rehabilitated". Counselors and teachers work with the student beyond mere punishment, and discuss what happened and why. It's important to make sure there are no repeat offenders.

Besides being a student representative on several education councils, I am also the co-founder of an online, student-led organization called Transgender Student Rights. Over our 14 months online, we have connected over 5,000 transgender students and allies.

I tell you this because in that role, I have seen and heard many students being bullied not just by students, but by teachers and administrators. These school employees usually mean well, but they do not have the appropriate understanding of gender identity, gender expression, or transgenderism necessary to help those students. As several testified before me, LGBT students are more at risk of bullying than their straight counterparts. A study of bullying by GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network, found that transgender students were even more likely to face harassment at school. To this end, I implore the commission to support efforts to add gender identity to state non-discrimination laws.

Lastly, I would like to speak for all of the Commonwealth's K-12 students, nearly one million strong, when I say that we need to have a voice in this discussion.

As I said earlier, we are the ones on the ground. We know what goes on both inside and outside of school. Give us a say in LEA anti-bullying task forces, more than a nominal place on local school committees, and representation on commissions like yours. Because no matter what else, you can not win this battle without us.

Thank you for your time tonight.